

PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

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Kids thrive when they feel the adults in their lives see them in a consistent way. So parents and teachers should try to use the precious minutes of a conference to reach an agreement about a child's strengths and challenges and to unite on the best ways they each can respond to them. Here are some tips on how to build a relationship that will benefit all:

1. Be there. Research shows that children do better academically when both parents attend conferences and PTA meetings. A parental no-show sends a message to a child that maybe school isn't such a high priority--or perhaps that the child isn't.
2. Remember the F word: focus. The aim of a parent-teacher conference is for adults to build a mutually respectful alliance that will support a child's sometimes difficult journey through school.
3. Share insider information. Tell the teacher what you know about your child as a learner. You know what your child loves and hates about school, what motivates your child, what has worked with teachers in the past. Also tell the teacher about your hopes and fears for your child. That information can help a teacher fine-tune instruction or interactions to be more effective. It builds the relationship between the adults when parents can share some of their own feelings about their child's future.
4. Use a report card as a jumping-off point, not as the centerpiece of the discussion. Turn any review of grades into an opportunity to get the teacher's more detailed observations about what's working and what's not for your child. Do not dwell on the grade itself, and do not attempt to pressure a teacher to change a grade, especially at a conference. (If you believe there is a real issue of injustice, take it to an administrator.) Remember, an A student won't die from getting a B, nor will a B student suffer irreparable harm from getting a C.

5. Inquire about your child's progress in areas that aren't easily measured by grades. Not every child is going to be a brilliant student, but you want your child, brilliant or not, to be a loving, respectful, productive citizen who can live in community with others. Ask whether she or he has friends, is part of a group, knows how to socialize and work respectfully with other children. How your child functions with other people is going to make a big difference in later life.

6. Ask what you can do. Be receptive to advice on how you can support your child's success without micromanaging or rescuing him or her from mistakes and the valuable lessons they offer.

7. Trust your child's development. Try to relax a little and have faith in your child and your child's journey through school.

8. Leave your own school baggage at home. We all have memories of teachers and classes that made us miserable. Set those aside and approach your child's teacher as a peer and partner. Assume a teacher wants to see your child succeed in school and in life--just as you do. The respect you show a teacher is contagious and will find its way back to your child.

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